

# How to watch the General Assembly in action

Posted 9/12/17 By **Megan Rhyne**

*(This is the first in a two-part series on tracking proposed legislation.)*

As the [“oldest continuous law-making body in the New World.”](#) the Virginia General Assembly is steeped in history and tradition. That tradition is awe-inspiring on the one hand, while on the other hand, it can seem arcane and cumbersome.

It is a part-time body made up of “citizen legislators” who, at least in theory, have professional lives they put on hold while they gather in Richmond for 60 days in even-numbered years, 45 days in odd-numbered years, to do the state’s business.

Those familiar with the process of making laws in the Commonwealth often take for granted the labyrinthine pathways and breakneck speed a bill travels from its introduction to its final passage or demise. Legislators, staff, lobbyists and reporters somehow manage to stay on top of the thousands of bills and resolutions (2,959 in 2017) that pass through the hallowed halls of Virginia’s State Capitol.

Citizens who are not directly involved in the legislative process are daunted by the rush of the session. Luckily, the dedicated members of the the Virginia Capitol Correspondents Association work diligently to inform the public of the most important, noteworthy or controversial measures, but because their numbers have dwindled over the years (the newspapers serving Norfolk/Virginia Beach, Roanoke and Hampton/Newport News do not even have a capitol beat reporter), they cannot possibly cover everything.

Much is left unreported or unpublished. Citizens may be interested in one single bill, or it may be a multitude of bills. Sometimes they want to know about bills on a variety of subjects. How can they possibly keep track?

This post focuses on watching the process: the committees, subcommittees and the floor session of each chamber. A future post will go over how to follow individual bills through the Legislative Information System.

The great equalizer this year is that everyone will be figuring out how to physically navigate the temporary quarters of the General Assembly. Legislator offices and committee rooms have been relocated to the [Pocahontas Building](#), while a new General Assembly Building is constructed.

There is a lot less space for the big meeting rooms of the old building, but the good news is that meetings — at least some of them — will be live streamed. The clerk of the Senate said at an orientation for lobbyists that standing committee and subcommittee meetings will be covered, while the clerk of the House said that a final decision about which subcommittee meetings to cover (there are nearly 100 House subcommittees) had not been made but that meetings of the standing committees would be streamed.

On the House side, the subcommittee is where all the real debate takes place. Bills can be defeated outright in a subcommittee. A bill may be advanced to the full committee (this is called being “reported”). And in some cases, a bill may be carried over until the next meeting.

The Senate uses subcommittees, too, but those committees can only make recommendations to the full committee.

At the subcommittees, the chair will have a docket of bills being considered at that meeting. Legislators will present their own bills, usually on a first come, first served basis, to the subcommittee, saying what the bill does and sometimes saying what the bill doesn't do. Sometimes the patron (the legislator) brings along someone who can better explain the bill (remember, these are part-time legislators and they often carry bills at the request of individuals, local governments, school districts, businesses and/or advocacy groups).

The subcommittee members will ask questions or raise concerns, then the chair will open up the discussion for those in support of the bill and to those in opposition to the bill. It's not just lobbyists who speak at this time: it's advocates, it's people's whose businesses or livelihoods will be affected, it's people who would otherwise be hurt or helped by a bill, and it's ordinary citizens who just have an interest. The subcommittee members may ask the speakers questions, but if not, at the conclusion of the public comment, the chair will give the patron the final word before deciding the fate of the bill.

The full, standing committees of both the House and the Senate will consider bills in much the same fashion as the subcommittee does and will again either defeat them or report them, this time to the full chamber, House or Senate. Bills may be defeated by a motion to table or a motion to pass by indefinitely, some may not get enough votes to report, and some are left in the subcommittee or committee without any action being taken. A few bills get "rolled" or "incorporated" into other identical or substantially similar bills.

The floor sessions of the full [House](#) and the full [Senate](#) have been live streamed for several years..

Each day at noon (sometimes earlier), citizens can tune in from their home or office computers or smart phones to watch legislators hash out bills that have made it through the committee system.

Recordings of these sessions started being archived earlier this year, so now citizens can watch any past session they couldn't get to. House sessions are also searchable, meaning you can type in a keyword or bill number and be taken to just those parts of one or more sessions where that topic is discussed. This can save an enormous amount of time. Senate sessions are not yet searchable.

House floor sessions open with a prayer offered by an invited clergyman and are followed by the "morning hour." This is the time when legislators can acknowledge guests and visitors sitting in the gallery (the galleries of both chambers are open to the public), make announcements or speak on a "point of personal privilege," which can be about any topic.

The clerk of the House then calls the calendar ([click here for a sample from the 2017 session](#)), which is the agenda for that day. Bills are divided up depending whether it is their first, second or third "constitutional readings," as well as whether bills are on the "contested" or "uncontested" calendar. The real debate on a bill will take place on its second reading. Bills on their third reading are given a yay or nay vote by the full chamber. (And just to confuse you, bills on third reading are taken up at the beginning of the calendar, while bills on their first reading are towards the end.) After all bills and resolutions on that day's calendar are heard, the clerk reads out announcements before the body adjourns for the day.

No legislator can speak on the House floor without first being recognized by the Speaker of the House. That includes legislators wanting to ask/answer direct questions of each other. Here's where all that formality comes in.

**Clerk:** House Bill 1545, a bill to amend and reenact two sections of the code related to public school student discipline, long-term suspension.

**Speaker:** The gentleman from Staunton, Mr. Bell.

**Del. Bell:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Speaking to the bill.

**Speaker:** The gentleman has the floor.

**Del. Bell:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. HB 1545 is .....

The Senate, with plenty of its own formality, is essentially the same, though many of the points of personal privilege are left to the end of the calendar, before the final announcements. Additionally, the real debate on the bill is on the third constitutional reading, not the second. Though both chambers will process bills in a block, the Senate probably does more of that than the House. The Senate is presided over by the Lieutenant Governor, who, during the Senate session is called “Mr. President.”

It is easy to get bogged down in the quirks of both bodies, but after observing a few sessions — at the committee level or the full floor sessions — a certain rhythm develops, making it far easier to follow. Access Point Public Affairs, a lobbying firm, also [offers this helpful glossary of additional terms](#) to help sort things out.

See also:

[locating bills of interest and then tracking them](#) through the Legislative Information System.